

# Chapter 1

## The Study of American Government

## ■ WHO GOVERNS?

1. How is political power actually distributed in America?
2. What explains major political change?

## ■ TO WHAT ENDS?

1. What value or values matter most in American democracy?
2. Are trade-offs among political purposes inevitable?

# What Is Political Power?

- *Power*—the ability of one person to get another person to act in accordance with the first person's intentions
- *Authority*—the right to use power
- *Legitimacy*—political authority conferred by law or by a state or national constitution

# Government's Greatest Achievements: A Top 10 List

Based on a survey of 450 history and political science professors and an analysis of over 500 public statutes, here is one list of the government's top 10 post-1950 achievements.

10. Promoted financial security in retirement
9. Reduced the federal budget deficit
8. Increased access to health care for older Americans
7. Strengthened the nation's highway system
6. Ensured safe food and drinking water
5. Reduced workplace discrimination

4. Reduced disease
3. Promoted equal access to public accommodations
2. Expanded the right to vote
1. Rebuilt Europe after World War II

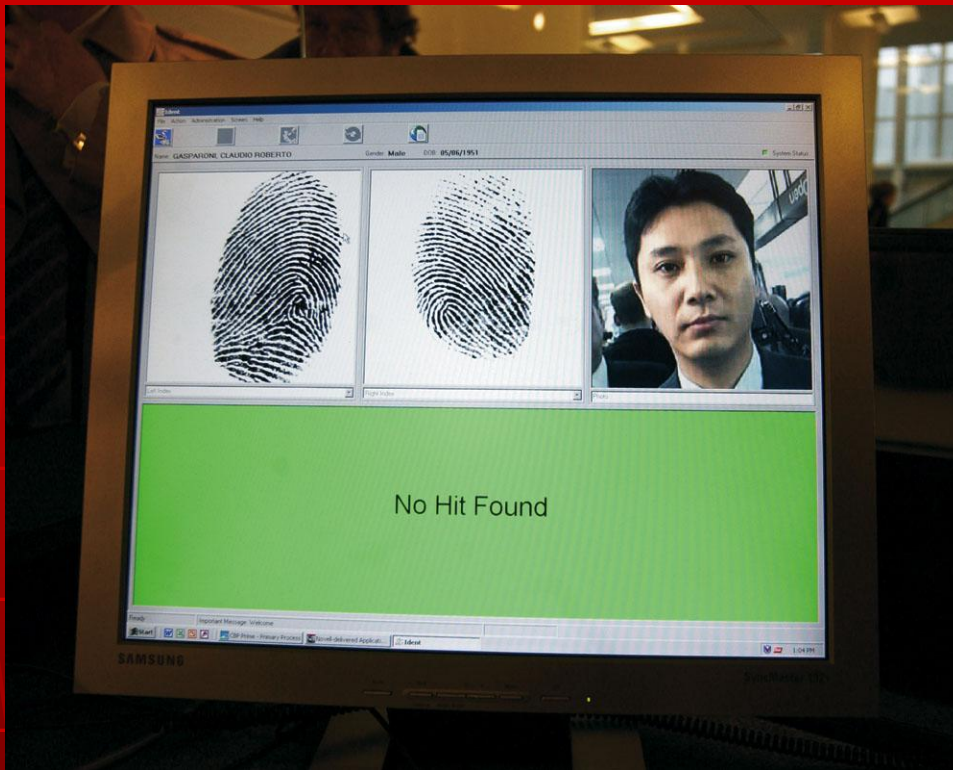
As you read this book and study American government, ponder what might be on the top 10 list for the first quarter of the 21st century.

*Source:* Adapted from Paul C. Light, "Government's Greatest Achievements of the Past Half Century," Reform Watch Brief #2, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., November 2000. Reprinted by permission of the Brookings Institution.



# What Is Democracy?

- *Democracy*—the rule of many
- *Direct or participatory democracy*—government in which all or most citizens participate directly
- *Representative democracy*—a government in which leaders make decisions by winning a competitive struggle for the popular vote.



Ramin Talaie/Corbis

To enter the United States, foreigners must now produce a photograph and fingerprints, p. 6.



AFP/Getty Images

An Iraqi woman shows her purple finger indicating that she has voted in 2005, that country's first free election in half a century, p. 6.

# Can a Democracy Fight a War Against Terrorists?

On September 11, 2001, a date that will forevermore be referred to as 9/11, war came to the United States when terrorists crashed four hijacked airliners, filled with passengers, into the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and into some empty land in Pennsylvania. About 3,000 people were killed.

How can a democratic nation respond to a war waged, not by an enemy nation, but by a loose collection of terrorists with cells in many parts of the world? America's new war against terrorism is much more difficult to fight than the one against Nazi Germany and the Japanese warlords in 1941.

- How can we reorganize the military so that it can respond swiftly and effectively against small targets?
- Is it constitutional to try captured terrorists in military tribunals?
- How much new law enforcement authority should be given to police and investigative agencies?
- Should America invade nations that support terrorists?

In the years ahead, these questions will raise profound challenges for American democracy.



Americans felt powerfully connected to their fellow citizens in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

Matt McDermott/CORBIS SYGMA



# Is Representative Democracy Best?

- *Aristotle* defined democracy as rule ordinary people, most of whom would be poor
- *John Locke* argued against powerful kings and in favor of popular consent
- *Thomas Hobbes* argued that an absolute, supreme ruler was essential to prevent civil war



# How Is Political Power Distributed?

- *Majoritarian politics* – elected officials are the delegates of the people, acting as the people
- *Political elite* – 4 descriptions
  - elites reflect a dominant social class
  - a group of business, military, labor union, and elected officials control all decisions
  - appointed bureaucrats run everything
  - representatives of a large number of interest groups are in charge

# How Is Political Power Distributed?

- *Class view*—the government is dominated by capitalists
- *Power elite view*—the government is dominated by a few top leaders, most of whom are outside of government
- *Bureaucratic view*—the government is dominated by appointed officials
- *Pluralist view*—the belief that competition among all affected interests shapes public policy

# Is Democracy Driven by Self-Interest?

- A policy may be good or bad independent of the motives of the person who decided it.
- The self-interest of individuals often is an incomplete guide to their actions.
- Many of the most important political happenings in U.S. were led against long odds by people who risked much knowing that they might not succeed and suspecting that, even if they did succeed, generations might pass before their efforts truly benefited anyone.

# What Explains Political Change?

- Government and its policies are shaped by
  - Economic interests
  - Powerful elites
  - Entrenched bureaucrats
  - Competing pressure groups
  - Morally impassioned individuals



Enigma/Alamy



# What Explains Political Change?

- The dominant political problem of the time shapes the nature of day-to-day political conflict through
  - Deep-seated beliefs
  - Major economic developments
  - Widely shared (or competing) opinions

# The Nature of Politics

- Judgments about institutions and interests can be made only after one has seen how they behave on a variety of important issues or potential issues, such as
  - economic policy
  - the regulation of business
  - social welfare
  - civil rights and liberties
  - foreign and military affairs

# WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

## MEMORANDUM

To: *Governor Steve Finore*

From: *Edward Heron, chief policy adviser*

Subject: *Initiative Repeal*

You have supported several successful initiatives (life imprisonment for thrice-convicted violent felons, property tax limits), but you have never publicly stated a view on the initiative itself, and the repeal proposal will probably surface during tomorrow's press briefing.

# WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

## **Arguments for a ban:**

1. Ours is a representative, not a direct, democracy in which voters elect leaders and elected leaders make policy decisions subject to review by the courts.
2. Voters often are neither rational nor respectful of constitutional rights. For example, many people demand both lower taxes and more government services, and polls find that most voters would prohibit people with certain views from speaking and deprive all persons accused of a violent crime from getting out on bail while awaiting trial.
3. Over the past 100 years, about 800 statewide ballot initiatives have been passed in 24 states. Rather than giving power to the people, special-interest groups have spent billions of dollars manipulating voters to pass initiatives that enrich or benefit them, not the public at large.



# WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

## **Arguments against a ban:**

1. When elected officials fail to respond to persistent public majorities favoring tougher crime measures, lower property taxes, and other popular concerns, direct democracy via the initiative is legitimate, and the courts can still review the law.
2. More Americans than ever have college degrees and easy access to information about public affairs. Studies find that most average citizens are able to figure out which candidates, parties, or advocacy groups come closest to supporting their own economic interests and personal values.
3. All told, the 24 states that passed 35 laws by initiative also passed more than 14,000 laws by the regular legislative process (out of more than 70,000 bills they considered). Studies find that special-interest groups are severely limited in their ability to pass new laws by initiative, while citizens' groups with broad-based public support are behind most initiatives that pass.

# WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

**Your decision:**

Favor ban?

Oppose ban?